

Reflections on Citizens' Empowerment and Local Development

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Good morning.

I am Elsie S. Lomong-oy and I come from the Mountain Province, in a geographically isolated village called Kin-iway which can be traversed by foot or jeepneys through treacherous mountain paths. We come from a tribe called Igorot-Aplai. We are a simple people, living mostly from the land. Most of the residents are marginal farmers, livestock growers while a few do small scale trading.

We are not strangers to poverty and hunger. Most of us earn the equivalent of \$1.80 a day. About 51.1% of our people live below the poverty threshold while 41.7% of the families subsist below the food threshold level.

I am fortunate to have obtained some education. Very few indigenous people in our region are able to reach college. Despite our difficult circumstances, I persevered so that I can give my family a better life.

We grew up thinking that being poor was simply a condition to be accepted. Years of neglect taught us to survive on our own. Government projects would come and go and made very little difference on our lives. Nearly all of them were implemented by either our local government and the national government.

In 2010, a project called KALAHY-CIDSS supported by the Millennium Challenge Corporation came to our village. I was skeptical and so were the rest of my neighbors. A team from the Department of Social Welfare started talking about "CDD" or

community-driven development and said that the project will be managed by the people themselves.

In the village assembly which is the highest decision-making structure in our barangay or village, I was elected as a member of the Bids and Awards Committee. This was my introduction to volunteer work. In KALAHY-CIDSS, it is the volunteers that lead implementation and perform voluntary services for the community. We are not paid for our work. Many have asked me why I sacrifice so much. When I thought about this, I think that I was first drawn to KALAHY-CIDSS, because for the first time, an ordinary citizen like me can participate in making decisions about what we need, how we will implement the project we have chosen, and how we should maintain it.

The community was guided by a team from the DSWD and the local government through a process that we call CEAC or Community Empowerment Activity Cycle. We analyzed our situation, identified our priority needs and solutions. Then we joined other villages in an inter municipal forum which is chaired by our Mayor and here we vote on which barangay projects should receive the funding from the combined grant from the DSWD, from the Local Government Units and from us, community members. One of the good things we learned from KALAHY-CIDSS is how to pool and negotiate for resources from national government agencies and our own local governments.

Because contributions are pooled together and we agree on what criteria we will use to choose the projects to be funded, we eliminated the “patronage system” that gives the option to our government officials to give money only to those who are politically aligned with them.

During the implementation of our projects, we receive training and coaching from technical staff from DSWD and the LGU, on how to

do small scale infra, how to procure, how to manage the funds given to us and how to monitor and maintain our projects.

My neighbors would often compare the projects we constructed using CDD with those that are undertaken by national government agencies. I am proud to say that ours like the roads, bridges and schools that we built are of equal if not better quality, they cost less and most importantly they are the projects that we decided to be what we need to solve poverty in Besao. As a member of the Bids and Awards Committee, I made sure we opened the process to everyone in the barangay. We followed strictly the guidelines set for procurement and I am certain not a single centavo was lost to corruption.

We always say that in a CDD approach, where you put the citizens at the front seat, you can never lose. Its very difficult to steal when the entire village knows not just how much money we have but how these should be used. Everything is reported to the Village or Barangay Assembly and we post our financial report in the barangay hall.

There is a grievance redress system and anyone who has a complain can raise this at any level he feels appropriate. For instance, if I have a grievance about the way funds are being managed, I can text the Mayor or the DSWD National Program Manager or even the DSWD Secretary herself and I know that I will immediately get a response.

Today, government is not just an abstract idea. I can feel government. I know my government is listening to the people. Finally, we are in possession of government funds that used to be given only to local governments or managed only by national government agencies. We now have a government that is willing to open its doors to us, ordinary citizens, so that we can help in

building small scale facilities like health centers, foot paths, small irrigations, in a way that is participatory and transparent.

In Besao, our municipality, we have constructed a total of 49 projects only in a span of 4 years, five times the number of projects that our local government could ever hope to build on their own. Why? Because we have mobilized other citizens. Development is not just the business of elected officials. It is everyone's look out.

These are projects that we never dreamed we would see in our lifetime. We have constructed water systems, day care centers, school, farm to market roads, drainage system, foot bridge, watershed protection. These were constructed by our own hands, from the sweat and aspirations of poor people like me who never had the voice and choice before to participate in governing our villages and town.

I look at them and I see the thousands who will benefit from them not just now but in many years to come. I see my grandchildren taking the sturdy footbridge to go to the school that residents helped build together. I see women taking up work and getting paid as much as our men during project construction. I see our farm products finally getting to the market and fetching a better price.

I hear people expressing themselves. The first time I heard the more timid ones speak out during our meetings, I very nearly cried. No, we are not going to be silent anymore. I will now hear what is in their hearts. I will now know that if we disagree, it is because we know more and can do more.

I look at our government officials and I am proud they did not betray our trust. Our mayor, the barangay officials and elected persons in our town, have taken a supportive role. They have

given to us the “power” that now generates the excitement and energy in our whole town.

It is that energy that drove us to mobilize the longest human chain of volunteers in the history of KALAHI CIDSS last August 10, 2015. People from all walks of life – men, women, children, government, media, NGOs, police officers – showed up numbering 700 in all to haul sand, from one person to the next, in an interconnected chain that stretches from a river some 1,500 meters up the slope where a school building is being planned to be constructed under KALAHI-CIDSS. We call this “ogbo-ogbo” or offering free services or “galatis”.

This is our unfolding story of change in Besao. Many more like this are happening around the country in communities that have adopted the CDD technology.

I have made it my personal crusade to tell our story. I want our national government to heed our call to make governance more participatory by allowing citizens the chance to implement projects. We have demonstrated that it can be done in Besao. We are not special. We are ordinary people that simply used our power to change how we decide and act. I think that this should be the roadmap for the future so we can finally end hunger, poverty and powerlessness.

Maraming Salamat po. Thank you.